

MARY McGRORY

*A. Pugnacious Pacifier*

A year ago, when Robert Komer was made President Johnson's special assistant on the pacification of Vietnam, Secretary of State Rusk offered him the following counsel:

"If you are not cordially disliked within six months, the President and I won't feel you are doing the job."

So brilliantly did Komer succeed that when the President recently told the Tennessee legislature that he was sending Komer to Saigon to pacify on the scene, a yelp of protest from American civilians went up that could be heard from here to Hanoi.

Komer was castigated by his future daily associates as a courtier who tells a President only what he wants to hear and a hounder of subordinates.

Komer, a genuine enthusiast—a friend says he has "an India-rubber personality"—and a green-beret optimist, is philosophical about "hatchet man" charges.

"A certain amount of that ain't a bad thing," he said the other day in his Executive Office Building quarters. Besides, he feels that civilians in a war zone cannot operate on a "business as usual" basis. Nor does he think we can pound on the Vietnamese to clean up graft and corruption as long as there is any incompetence or slack in the American sector.

Just to avert any possible mass resignations, however, he dashed from Guam to South Vietnam.

"I showed them I didn't have horns and I told them 'You guys have been doing a good job,'" Komer reported. He also scotched rumors that he had gone after his old friend, William C. Porter, the popular deputy ambassador whom he will replace.

He resents the charge he is a "yes-man" to President Johnson. He treasures a letter written after a 1963 Middle Eastern expedition, in which the then vice president said he

respected Komer for having been a "no-man."

"Why wouldn't I tell him the straight stuff?" asked Komer. "I'm not from Texas. I'm not a member of the in-group. The only respect he could have for me comes from the way I do my work."

Komer's abysmally bad press arises in part from a penchant for writing what his former White House boss, McGeorge Bundy, calls "Gee-whiz-goddamit kind of cables that make no friends in the field."

Another old friend says, "Bob tends to get combative on paper. I think he should sleep on some of his memos."

Komer prides himself on the fact that two presidents have admired his memos. In fact, President Johnson once exhorted Komer to instruct certain long-winded cabinet members in his own crisp, cablese style. Komer of course did not follow through.

A Phi Beta Kappa Harvard graduate, he spent 15 years as an analyst in CIA—"I was in the ivory tower, never in the spook business." He was recommended by William P. Bundy to his brother McGeorge when the latter was setting up his "Little State Department" in the White House basement during the New Frontier Days.

Komer and McGeorge Bundy worked amicably and zestfully together for three years. McGeorge Bundy, not an easy man to please, says of his former deputy that he "is terribly clear-headed and sensible and tenacious."

Komer worked with the new ambassador to Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker, to unravel the India-Pakistan and Dutch-Indonesian tangles.

"I was always a low-posture guy," he says. "I was always a pleader on the score of understanding the Asians."

At Guam, Premier Ky, mindful of the anti-Komer uproar at home, came to Komer and assured him he

had told his cabinet that the appointment was "a good thing."

Komer's personality in person, as distinguished from on paper, is not corrosive.

Rather suggesting the dachshund with his round brown eyes, long nose and eager manner, he is cordial and articulate, and plainly dedicated to the task at hand.

It is a daunting one. He must funnel through the Vietnamese the distribution of rice, fertilizer, concrete for roads and metal for school-house roofs. He must oversee AID, USIA and CIA personnel. He must work with the armies of both countries. He must show the Vietnamese officials how to run their country and make Vietnamese peasants think they are already doing so.

He expects to work his usual seven-day week. Mrs. Komer, a vivacious blonde, is allowed to go with him, but will stay home watching over the three teen-age children of Komer's first marriage.

Komer likes the Vietnamese people. A gifted amateur chef, who specializes in Oriental dishes, he also likes their cooking. After seven visits, he believes they are on their way to representative self-government. He thinks the regional elections next month and the national elections in September will not throw up a leader of the stature of Ho Chi Minh—with whom southerners are increasingly disillusioned—but will counter a famous personality with a democratic system.

Premier Ky, he thinks, is already acting like a candidate. The constituent assembly, bourgeois, urban and landlord oriented, did not advocate land reform, but Ky, the potential candidate, has.

"Pretty soon those people will have a congressman to write to," says the hopeful pacifier. "That could make all the difference."

CPYRGHT